



## **Quest for An Authentic Existence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A Feminine Response to Slavery**

**Dr. Gurdev Singh**

**Assistant Professor of English**

**Maharaj Singh College, Saharanpur (UP)**

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988) grows out of the historical context of American slavery and reconstruction. It embodies a response to the Fugitive Slave Law to which Sethe, the chief female protagonist of the novel, falls a prey in 1855. The Fugitive slaves were those who had run away from slave masters in the south and found haven in the northern and border states. The Fugitive Slave Law, enacted by the Congress, empowered the slave masters to reclaim their property i.e. the runaways. Sethe, a runaway slave, who is the chief female protagonist in *Beloved* slits her baby's throat rather than see her sold as a slave when her slave master comes to reclaim her and her children. Sethe is the fictional representation of Margaret Garner, who in 1851, had escaped with her children from her master in Kentucky to Ohio. When she and her children were about to be reclaimed by the slave master, she tried to kill her children rather than return them to a life of slavery. She succeeded in killing one of the children and was imprisoned for infanticide.

In addressing the issue of slavery, Morrison wants people to be able to feel at a personal level what it meant to be a slave and what slavery did to people. A remarkable feature of the novel is the account of slavery presented through feminine viewpoint. How does slavery affect the life of a black slave woman? Raped, exploited and without the help of her male counterpart how does she manage to survive? Beaten and oppressed like the black male, the black female has to suffer much more because of her sex and the divine gift of motherhood. The central concerns that Morrison's female characters bring forth in

---

the novel are the ethical dilemmas posed by slavery, the complex imperatives of individual and collective memory, the dynamics of mother-child relationships and importance of race and community.

After killing her child, Sethe is afflicted by a moral predicament. She tries to gain strength from the belief that by killing her daughter; she had spared the child from slavery's dehumanizing consequences. In this context, she highlights the terror of slavery: "...anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you. Dirty you so bad you could not take yourself anymore" (57). It is a tragic paradox that the infanticide is inspired by maternal love. Historically, it is linked to the reproductive capacity of slave women for who feigned illness, deliberate and non-deliberate abortion, and self-imposed sterility constituted avenues of resistance to the perpetuation of slavery. At the same time, it is pertinent to mention that "although infanticide was a typical behavior on the part of the slave mothers, it was nevertheless an avenue that was available and used by some" (Weems 107).

Commenting on infanticide, Bell Hooks observes that Sethe's avenue of resistance to slavery is followed by greater anguish:

Of course Sethe's attempt to end the historical anguish of the black people only reproduces it in a different form. She conquers the terror through perverse re-enactment through resistance, using violence as a means of fleeing from a history that is a burden too great to bear (47).

Sethe experiences the reproduced historical anguish in the form of her condemnation by the black community, desertion by Paul D, her later life companion and lover, denunciation by Denver, her daughter, possession by Beloved, her murdered daughter and personal agony. Giving opinion on people's indignation in this regard, Oprah Winfrey points out: "People resented Sethe not because of what she did but because there was never a moment of regret. She didn't crumble she didn't fail (20). Sethe vehemently holds on to her conviction that what she did was right for her daughter. Her statement that each of her children is a "life she had made" and that each had "all the parts of her" (163) implies that she owns her children and controls their lives. At this point it is apt to quote Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems who underline the difference between

parental ownership of children and the slave master's ownership of the children of slave women:

The difference is significant, through, because slavery is concerned primarily with economics and the reduction of human beings as cattle for the sake of profit. The other is concerned with what is a central aspect of maternal love and may in fact be crucial to what is called instinctive maternity (109).

Paul D. is not appreciative of the maternal predicament of Sethe. He observes: “for a used to be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (45). Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems observe regarding Paul D's contention:

Here Paul D points to the tension created by the system of slavery and the maternal instinct of the slave woman. Slavery claimed ownership of all of its property, irrespective of age and gender, including the siblings of its female slaves. Simultaneously the slave mother instinctively sought to hold on to her progeny (111-12).

Sethe's act of infanticide is an indictment of the atrocities inflicted upon the slave women by the slack masters. It represents her triumph in the face of terror of slavery. This aspect of Sethe's violence against her own child is emphasized by Toni Morrison's response to the question why she wanted to tell this excruciating story. She remarks, “that however heartbreaking and even conflicting, it is to focus on Sethe's ordeal, this story also bears witness to the monumental truth that the slave owners did not win” (12).

The racial memory of the terrifying ordeals of slavery that prompt infanticide is caught and held in Sethe's consciousness. She recalls that her paternal grandmother was raped by a slave master who had later sold her child. Her maternal grandmother was gang-raped by a crew en route to American slavery. Sethe is painfully aware of Ella's fate that is locked up and repeatedly raped by a father and that of Stamp Paid's wife, Vashti who is forced to have sex with the slave master. Competing, upon the method in the sexual

violence, let loose by slave masters, Angela Davis observes: "Rape was a terribly efficient method of keeping black women and alike in check. It was a routine arm of repression" (83).

Sethe tells Beloved that, by killing her, she had tried to protect her from what she knew was "terrible" and that she had actually shielded the baby from the humiliation and despair that killed Baby Suggs, from "what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D. tremble" (251). She fervently pleads with the ghost of her slain daughter that she had protected her dear child and herself from "undreamable dreams" in which "a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs, and threw her out of the wagon" (251). It is implied that for Sethe getting flogged, maimed, mutilated and even killed pales into insignificance when compared to getting raped which is the horror of horrors.

The feminist problematization of the horror of rape and infanticide contextualizes the surfacing of Sethe's painful repressed memories in the wake of Beloved's return and her desperate attempt at keeping the past at bay as it keeps intruding upon the present. The power of the past is represented by the ghost. The absence/presence of the slaughtered child is inscribed in '124', the number of the house, hinting at the third missing child who has been haunting the place for eighteen years. Then the ghost becomes flesh and enters into Sethe's house in the guise of a twenty year old woman-child (The age Beloved would have attained had she lived). In the house she becomes her mother's conscience. As the traumatic experience of infanticide is revived by the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits, it takes the form of hallucinations and nightmares to get inserted in Sethe's consciousness and traumatize her. The dead child returns and feeds on a diet of Sethe's past and serves as the materialization of Sethe's memory.

The feminist deconstruction of infanticide shows that Sethe refuses to assume responsibility for her baby's death on the plea that infanticide was an expression of her immense love for her daughter. Consequently, she refuses to acknowledge that her act of love and mercy was also a murder. Sethe's refusal stands in the way of Sethe's attaining an authentic existence. She tends to review her position regarding infanticide after her encounter with the ghost child. She keeps explaining herself to Beloved and dwells upon

the unspeakable horrors of slavery with a view to convincing the ghost that she had killed Beloved to spare her from the life of a female slave. She begs for Beloved's forgiveness but Beloved does not relent. The horror of infanticide comes to a climax during the exorcism of Beloved by thirty women of the community. Sethe's reliving the horrible moment, when the schoolmaster had come to reclaim her, synchronizes with the arrival of the white Quaker philanthropist, Edward Bodwin at 124 to pick up Denver for her first day of work. Beloved, pregnant and naked, goes to the porch to confront the women and Sethe, seeing Bodwin coming up the road, thinks that schoolteacher, the slave catcher, has come to take her children. Shouting "No no, no. No." (262). Sethe charges the intruder with ice pick in hand.

Sethe's act of violence against what she perceives as her enemy marks her moment of awakening. The altered perspective, implying that instead of killing her baby she should have killed the schoolteacher (the racial enemy), engenders self-realization. It is at this point that her search for wholeness and freedom reaches the climax and she achieves an authentic existence. She is saved from the relentless fury of the revengeful ghost and the crushing burden of the legacy of slavery represented by it.

Resistance to slavery's onslaught, signified by infanticide, is transformed into rage against oppression when Sethe tries to kill the white oppressor rather than her child. The paradigm shift in her perception of the adversary is the sign of stirring of black rage against systems of white domination and oppression. The stirring of rage enables Sethe to identify the racial enemy. Sethe's attack on Bodwin is an expression of black rage against oppression and victimization. It is through the medium of rage that she acquires an authentic existence. Thus rage becomes her positive and constructive response to oppression unlike the suppression of rage that is manifested in the violence against her own child. It acts as a catalyst of the resurrection and replenishment of Sethe's being and consciousness. Its aftermath brings self-knowledge to her.

Sethe's long and tiring journey to an authentic existence is assisted by Paul D., Amy, Baby Suggs, Denver and the African-American community. They are instrumental in reclaiming and liberating her from the thrall of the vindictive Beloved. In the process of reclaiming Sethe, Paul D., Amy, Baby Suggs and Denver also acquire an authentic existence through coming to terms with their respective predicaments, confusions and

dilemmas and shedding their inhibitions and hesitations. Consequently, they discover themselves.

Paul D's tumultuous journey of self-discovery begins with Beloved's return. It marks the surfacing of Paul D.'s painful memories. Despite Paul D.'s concerted effort to decimate the power of the past, the ghost compels him to revisit the past. Pamela E. Barnett, in this regard, brings to light the sinister designs of Beloved, the female demon:

The character Beloved is not just the ghost of Sethe's dead child. She is a succubus, a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen. The succubus figure which is related to the vampire, another sexualized figure that drains a vital fluid, was incorporated into African American folklore in the form of shape-shifting witches who "ride" their terrified victims in the night and Beloved embodies the qualities of that figure as well (418).

The supernatural/folkloric perspective shows how Beloved drains Paul D. of semen and gets pregnant which is indicated by the swelling of her body. The enactment of rape by Beloved kindles Paul D.'s nightmarish memories. He views it as an "overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrollable, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). Beloved's sexual encounter with Paul D. is in the nature of an intrusive phenomenon. It brings back the traumatic experience. The succubus figure, represented by Beloved, throws into relief the reversal of roles manifest in the figuration of a female rapist and a male rape victim. The reversed roles contextualize the shifting of focus from gender to race as the category that accounts for the perpetration of rape in Beloved.

Beloved's assault revives Paul D's memory of his sexual violation, associated with "breakfast" that is served to black prisoners in Alfred, Georgia. The prisoners are forced to cater to the vagaries of the prison guards. They announce mockingly, "want some breakfast nigger" and "hungry nigger?" Thus the guards' appetite is deflected on the black prisoners who are bound to reply, "Yes Sir" (107-8). Lee Edelman argues that by forcing the prisoners to express homosexual desire, the guards subject them to symbolic castration.

The sexual violence is, at once, racist and homophobic: “white racists (literally) castrate other white homosexuals (figuratively) are castrated themselves” (Edelman 56). Lee Edelman further contends that the breakfast scene, in which homosexuality is imposed on the prisoners, represents the “violent disappropriation of masculine authority that underlines the paranoid relation of black and white in our modern, ‘racially’ polarized, patriarchal formation.

Paul D’s sexual exploitation by the white guards implies that social/cultural domination of black men by white men takes the shape of sexual violence against them. It represents the fusion of sexual and racial oppression and suggests that when black masculinity fails to find expression, it becomes connotative of emasculation and social impotence. It further signifies that Paul D. is emasculated by passive homosexuality and the humiliation of being forced to express his own desire for being raped. Paul D’s sexual encounter with Beloved is also marked by his own desire to be raped. It is borne out by his confession that he feels humiliated when Beloved forcibly moves him from Sethe’s bed. He feels further degraded and disgraced by his own uncontrollable “appetite” for her.

The encounter with Beloved makes Paul D. undergo once again the sexual punishment that he had suffered at the hands of the white prison guards and relive the horrible experience of having been forced to suck an iron bit after his aborted attempt to escape. Such harrowing experiences are locked up in the tobacco tin which is the substitute of his heart. He does not let anyone have whiff of (the tin’s) contents because such a disclosure would shame him. He has been piling his painful memories “one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he gets to 124 nothing in this world can pry it open.

As Beloved does not belong to “this world”, she traumatizes Paul D. and breaks open the tin box. Valerie Smith puts forth the view that “the act of intercourse with Beloved restores Paul D. to himself, restores his heart to him” (348). Actually Paul D. is raped by Beloved. The rape, in a sense, liberates him from the fetters of a disturbing past and helps him in his journey towards acquiring an authentic existence. But for the nightmarish experience of being seduced by a supernatural being, Paul D. would not have realized the inefficacy of his defence mechanisms and got rid of the burdens of the past. As a result of the seduction by Beloved, Paul D. succeeds in assimilating the traumatic

experiences of the past and confronting the pain that has, throughout, been locked up in his heart. The bursting open of the tobacco tin and his crying out, “Red heart, Red Heart, Red heart” synchronizes with his reaching the climax in the sexual encounter with Beloved.

The rape by Beloved and kindling of the memory of sexual violation by the white guards free Paul D. from the bondage of the past and restores his heart to him. But his psychic healing does not take place because he remains unconvinced of his own virility. Ironically, Paul D. is described as the last of the Sweet Home men by Garner, the slave master who louts his manhood in order to exploit his productivity. After the death of Garner, Paul D. discovers the hollowness of the appellation. After gaining freedom, he continues asking, “Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a white man who was supposed to know?” He wondered whether Garner was naming what he saw or creating what he did not. Thus doubts, regarding his manhood, keep lingering in his mind.

Because of the gnawing doubts Paul D. attributes his failure to frustrate Beloved’s assault to his inadequacy as a man. He needs Sethe’s help but the shame of asking a woman for help being too great, he starts asserting his masculinity. Instead of confessing, I am not a man he tells Sethe that he wants her pregnant with his child; suddenly it was a solution; a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl’s spell. He wants to “document his manhood” because he feels that the supernatural rape and the sexual violation by the white guards in Alfred, Georgia has emasculated him.

In Alfred, Georgia, Paul D. and his fellow prisoners choose impotence by saying “Yes Sir” to the white guards who violate them. Their meekness is reinforced by Stamp Paid’s submission to the will of the white slave master who rapes his wife and Halle’s mute witnessing of the sexual assault on Sethe. Obviously, Paul D., Stamp and Halle have been emasculated by the white victimizers. The emasculation, brought about by racial victimization, is presented in terms of gender in order to signify the failure of their manhood. Though he is punished as a black man in a racist ambience, Paul D. describes his sexually passive position in terms of gender. Moreover, his predicament becomes more pronounced when he cannot give expression to the experience of having been raped by a supernatural woman. His shame as a male rape victim is too deep to be acknowledged



publicly. Because of this, he cannot participate in the collective effort of the community of women to exorcise Beloved.

The rejuvenated Paul D's flight from bondage to Ohio is a landmark in his search for authentic existence and self-discovery. The damage done to his psyche by the schoolmaster when he was at "the peak of his strength, taller than tall men, and stronger than most," and the psychological devastation, caused by the loss of his friends who had constituted his surrogate family and the violation by the white guards at Alfred, Georgia have hardened Paul D's heart, symbolized by "a tobacco tin, buried in his chest....its lid rusted shut." His reunion with Sethe, signifying "a primordial element in his spiritual and psychological quest; his desire for family" (Samuels 179) salvages him from the mire of degradation.

Paul D's cherished desire for the family gets a setback when he rejects Sethe because of the infanticide that she has committed. This, in turn, hampers his personal quest for wholeness and integration. Having failed in achieving wholeness through reunion with Sethe, Paul D. seeks solace in the Church of the Holy Redeemer. The Church, too, does not offer him what he seeks. Lodged in the cold cellar, he continues to seek comfort and protection in alcohol. There is complete darkness in the cellar. He commits sacrilege by drinking in front of the cross. Evidently Christianity, to which he is frequently exposed, does not lead him to self-realization. Paul D. gets disenchanted with Christianity. The Church cellar becomes yet another form of his wooden tomb at Alfred, Georgia, representing his symbolic death.

Having failed to experience redemption in the Church, a disillusioned Paul D. comes out of the dark cellar and meets Stamp Paid, who ferries fugitives across the Ohio River. Stamp Paid's realization that no one but he is responsible for his redemption and his example of dedicating his life to the service of his ethnic group offer to Paul D an alternative to church. Its strength lies in the spiritual/cultural resources of the African tradition, which Paul D. harnesses for the attainment of psychological wholeness and existential authenticity in the face of racial oppression of the dominant class. The transformation that Paul D. undergoes prepares the ground for his whole-hearted acceptance of Sethe, which, in turn, helps her to attain salvation.

Paul D.'s sensitivity to her disturbing past is, at once, touching and poignant. He gives solace to Sethe when she bemoans the final exit of Beloved. "She was my best thing", she tells him, he reassures her, "You your best thing, Sethe, You are" Paul D's washing Sethe's feet is reminiscent of Baby Suggs' ritual of cleaning Sethe when she had arrived in Ohio. Paul D.'s therapeutic gestures of tenderness testify to his recognition of Sethe's role as nourished and nurturer. At this point, Paul D. perceives Sethe, for the first time, from a perspective of authenticity and self-affirmation. He announces: "She is a friend of my mind, she gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gathers them and gives them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (272-273). The textual evidence reveals that culmination of Paul D's quest for family, wholeness and authentic existence synchronizes with Sethe's self-recovery and rejuvenation.

Paul D's enactment of the ritual of Sethe's rejuvenation is thematically bound with what is accomplished by Amy and Baby Suggs during Sethe's flight to freedom. Amy is instrumental in aiding Sethe during her tumultuous journey to self-discovery. After her flight from slavery to freedom on the other side of the river Ohio, Sethe forms her relationship with Amy, the daughter of a former indentured white servant who, like Sethe's mother, had died bequeathing bondage and victimization to her daughter. Both are adolescent, poor and runaways. Sethe is bound for Cincinnati, Ohio where her children live and Amy is travelling to Boston, in search of velvet, which is symbolic of her yearning for the finer things of life and happiness. During the tumultuous moment of Denver's birth, Amy assumes the role of a restorer and reviver of Sethe. She brings the premature baby girl, Denver, into the world. Thus two throw away people, two lawless outlaws – a slave and a barefoot white woman with unpinned hair temporarily slip into each other's existence." As a mark of gratitude to Amy, Sethe gives the name 'Denver' to the child.

In introducing Amy Denver, Morrison chooses to present interracial sisterhood that transcends the barrier of race and for a moment the focus shifts from racial tensions to the human bond between the two wayfarers who happen to be destitute. The coming together in this episode of the black and the white female characters to add meaning and

purpose to each others' lives is an extension of the theme of black sisterhood that forms a recurrent motif in black women writing.

The process of renewal and replenishment, initiated by Amy, is carried forward by Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law of Sethe. Baby, a former slave woman, who after gaining freedom, seeks occupation and solace in giving advice, passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, cooking, preaching, singing, dancing and “loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (137). She makes available to Sethe the collective experience of the black community. It is she who performs the rite of cleansing Sethe that facilitates her transformation. The ritual of rejuvenation, enacted by Baby Suggs, inculcates self-love in Sethe which becomes the precursor of her rebirth and renewal. Baby Suggs enthuses Sethe to shed her burdens and urges her to love her heart. As a result, Sethe experiences a full lunar month “the travels of one whole moon” (95) of hitherto unknown freedom and fulfillment. The symbolism of the lunar cycle unfolds the panorama of life, death and regeneration. Samuels and Hudson-Weems make a revealing comment: “...Although it ends tragically for Sethe, this twenty-eight day period accords her “days of healing, ease and real talk”....Thus, it brings regeneration and stability, allowing Sethe to exit the orbit of her luminal world of slavery though she is still, legally, a slave; she is fugitive” (118).

Thanks to Baby Suggs, Sethe, for the first time, experiences relatedness through her inclusion in a sisterhood of black women. Sethe ceases to be an outsider as she comes within the fold of the black community. Her experience, in its totality, represents a giant stride in her journey to wholeness because after freeing herself from the bondage of slavery, she starts claiming and asserting ownership of the freed self.

The intrusion of the schoolteacher on her short-lived freedom brings about her symbolic death and the murder of Beloved. As the violence against Beloved is rooted in the discourse of race, the onus for infanticide is shifted from the individual to the institution of slavery that has spawned it. It reverses the process of Sethe's purification and regeneration, initiated by Baby Suggs and sets into motion the process of her estrangement from the black community. In the wake of infanticide, the period of Sethe's twenty eight days of freedom is followed by eighteen years of disapproval and loneliness.

After the secluded eighteen years, Denver plays a significant role in bringing back Sethe into the comforting folds of the African-American community. She aids Sethe in her attempts to self-discovery. She informs the community of Beloved's physical resurrection and the way she is draining Sethe of vitality. If it was not for Denver's efforts to reach out to the community, Sethe would have been destroyed. Denver successfully overcomes many struggles: internal, worldly and household to emerge as woman with a future. Denver realizes the redemptive powers of the African-American community. By reaching out to the community, she attains freedom: personal, economic and spiritual but most important of all she helps her mother attain an authentic existence.

The African-American community is responsible for the ultimate rescue of Sethe from dissolution. The women in *Beloved* make a collective bid to exorcise Beloved and cleanse 124 of the sinister effect of infanticide that ends Sethe's ostracism and initiates, once again, her integration into the community. Sethe's integration into the community and the exorcism of Beloved, coinciding with Sethe's experiencing rage and attacking her real adversary, mark the culmination of her quest for authentic existence. Sethe attains authentic existence through reconciliation with the community and Paul D. and finally with her own self. Her choosing to attack the enemy illustrates how Sethe has made a notable progress in recognizing the racial adversary. At this moment she forgives herself for killing Beloved and resolves to move on with her life without letting the past haunt and oppress her anymore. The transformation of Sethe is validated by the emphasis laid by the traditional African philosophy on the intermingling of the spiritual and the physical universes which is as an expression of Toni Morrison's ethnically oriented feminism. It is a component in the network of drives and impulses i.e. infanticide, Beloved's reappearance, her exorcism, kindling of rage, identification of the racial enemy, relinquishment of the past and return of Paul D. that bring to culmination Sethe's quest for authentic existence.

## Works Cited

- Barnett, Pamela E. "Figuration of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*". PMLA (May 1997): 418-427, Print.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore : John Hopkins University, 1996.
- Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. London : the Women Press Ltd, 1982.
- Edelman, Lee. *Homographesis*. New York : Rutledge, 1994.
- Hooks, Bell. *Ain't La Woman : Black Women and Feminism*. Boston : South End, 2003.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London : Picador, 1988.
- "Rediscovering Black History" New York Times Magazine (21 August, 1974) : 15-17, print.
- Samuels, Wilfred D. and Clenora Hudson Weems. *Toni Morrison*. Boston : Dwayne, 1990.
- Smith, Valerie. *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Winfrey, Oprah. *Journey to Beloved*. New York : Hyperion, 1998.